

STEP 4: Writing Research Questions

What is a research question?

A research question is a **clear, focused, concise, complex and arguable** question around which you center your research. You should ask a question about an issue that you are genuinely curious about.

Why is a research question essential to the research process?

Research questions help writers focus their research by providing a path through the research and writing process. The specificity of a well-developed research question helps writers avoid the “all-about” paper and work toward supporting a specific, arguable thesis.

“The Big Picture”:
The order and focus of your research questions will become the order and focus of your thesis statement.

When creating your research questions, avoid questions that may have limited responses (too narrow), as those will clearly not help you write a developed paragraph answering it. Also, avoid creating questions that are too broad—as those will make it difficult for you to focus on *what* to research.

Example of what NOT TO DO:

- ☒ What is “censorship”? ← That sort of question should have been answered in your “light” research (Step 1!) and should be discussed in your introductory paragraph, not in your body paragraphs.

Example of what TO DO: If your topic is “Censorship”, your research questions could be any 3 of the following:

- ☒ What prompted the need for it?
- ☒ Who decides what gets censored in the US (and other nations)?
- ☒ Why are books and information on internet sites being censored?
- ☒ When did censorship first begin?
- ☒ Why should (or shouldn’t) citizens fight against censorship? (Should they?)
- ☒ How does censorship in America threaten one’s freedom of speech?

PRACTICE: Study these three research question examples on juvenile delinquency (another topic that can be researched). Do you agree that Question C is the best option? Read why...

A. What is the 1994 rate of juvenile delinquency in the U.S.?

- ☒ *Question "a" is too narrow, since it can be answered with a simple statistic.*

B. What can we do to reduce juvenile delinquency in the U.S.?

- ☒ *Question "b" is too broad; it implies that the researcher will cover many tactics for reducing juvenile delinquency that could be used throughout the country.*

C. Does education play a role in reducing juvenile delinquents' return to crime?

- ☒ *This question, on the other hand, is focused enough to research in some depth. It is your best choice.*

“BACKUP ASSISTANCE” – Having trouble coming up with research questions for your social issue? Below are 3 “general” research questions that could be applied to almost any social issue topic:

1. Who does it affect?
2. How can this be solved or minimized?
3. What factors contribute to its cause?

Exercise: Is the Question Too Broad or Too Narrow?

Below are five exercises designed to improve your ability to select a good research question. Select what you think is the best research question out of the three (neither too broad nor too narrow).

[CHECK YOUR ANSWERS & READ EXPLANATIONS HERE.](#)

1. Which Research Question below is the best (not too broad or too narrow)? Explain why.

- A. What marketing strategies does the Coca-Cola company currently apply?
- B. What is the Coca-Cola company's future marketing plan?
- C. What marketing strategies has the Coca-Cola company used in the past?

Answer: _____ Explanation: _____

2. Which Research Question below is the best (not too broad or too narrow)? Explain why.

- A. What impact has deregulation had on the airline industry?
- B. What percentage of commercial airline crashes was traced to negligent maintenance during the 10 years immediately preceding and following deregulation?
- C. What impact has deregulation had on commercial airline safety?

Answer: _____ Explanation: _____

3. Which Research Question below is the best (not too broad or too narrow)? Explain why.

- A. Do children sent to day care or preschool start kindergarten with more developed skills?
- B. Do children sent to day care or preschool start kindergarten with more highly developed language skills?
- C. Do children sent to day care or preschool start kindergarten with larger vocabularies?

Answer: _____ Explanation: _____

4. Which Research Question below is the best (not too broad or too narrow)? Explain why.

- A. What are the 14 different disease-causing genes that were discovered in 1994?
- B. What is the importance of genetic research in our lives?
- C. How might the discovery of a genetic basis for obesity change the way in which we treat obese persons, both medically and socially?

Answer: _____ Explanation: _____

5. Which Research Question below is the best (not too broad or too narrow)? Explain why.

- A. How can adult children of alcoholics interact most positively with their alcoholic parents?
- B. How do adult children of alcoholics interact with their alcoholic parents?
- C. What is the major emotional reaction of adult children of alcoholics to their alcoholic parents?

Answer: _____ Explanation: _____

[CHECK YOUR ANSWERS & READ EXPLANATIONS HERE.](#)